Editorial

This first issue of the Hong Kong Journal of Applied Linguistics arose by a process of natural evolution from the English Centre's Hongkong Papers in Linguistics and Language Teaching. The old Hongkong Papers attracted some fine contributions from Hong Kong and elsewhere, and since a system of peer review was already in place, it seemed a natural progression to go on to the production of a fully fledged journal.

The theme of Hong Kong Journal of Applied Linguistics follows that of its predecessor: The main focus is the broad field of applied linguistics, but particularly teaching and learning, as it concerns Chinese communities in Hong Kong or other parts of the world.

In this opening issue, we begin with an article by Bill Littlewood on the important subject of inter-cultural perspectives on pedagogy. In this case, the teaching of writing is examined to see how far the imposed conventions of academic writing conflict with the conventions of native language and culture and self-expression. A balance needs to be maintained between adequate self-expression on one hand, and a command of the conventions necessary for academic success on the other. Littlewood makes some suggestions about how this can be achieved, drawing on his experiences in an academic writing course for first year university students of education. A key focus is on the collaboration of the reader and writer in the production of text.

Bill Winser then examines the Western approach to language teaching and learning and its suitability for Asian learners, especially in mainland China. The need for cultural sensitivity is stressed, especially as there is often the tacit assumption that Western practices constitute superior teaching and learning methods applicable to all situations. It is concluded that a functional approach is best suited to this aim, and some features of such an approach are elaborated.

Arthur McNeill's investigation of trainee teachers' lexical knowledge of pedagogical texts will be of interest to many in the field of teaching or teacher education. Various aspects of word knowledge were examined, such as meaning, morphology, pronunciation and the ability to use the word productively, in a sample of trainee teachers in
Hong Kong and Beijing. The results of the study show some interesting contrasts in achievement and approach between Beijing and Hong Kong and some surprising findings in the area of productive vocabulary use. In Hong Kong, for example, students appear to have developed a remarkable facility for producing sentences which are semantically and formally correct without a corresponding indication that the meaning of key lexis has been understood.

David Nunan looks at some current practices in language teaching, arguing for an organic approach to replace the linear metaphor which pervades much of past (and present) pedagogy. Instead of a 'brick-by-brick' construction, a more integrated development is suggested as more in line with current thinking in second language acquisition research. Noting that many constructed examples in textbooks differ markedly from the language of actual speakers, some real life situational texts are offered along with some useful suggestions for teaching activities.

It is well known that the Chinese and English writing systems are very different, but little has been done on the exact mechanisms by which readers decode these written symbol systems. Grace Hsieh examines decoding strategies as used by readers of English and Chinese in America. Both short-term word recognition and longer term recall tests were conducted among L1 American subjects, and compared with those of Chinese learners who had resided in America for varying lengths of time. It was found that Chinese learners applied different strategies in decoding Chinese L1 and English L2 texts, and that length of residence affected strategies for English word recall.

Desmond Allison examines some criticisms of the teaching of comprehension, especially from the adherents of the approach characterised by the term 'critical pedagogy'. Such criticism may take the position that teaching comprehension unduly restricts the range of possible interpretations of a text. Thus opposing perceptions at variance with the prevailing educational and political discourses may be suppressed. Allison argues that teachers should be aware of these dangers, but that nevertheless much of value remains in comprehension teaching. In particular, a careful distinction should be maintained between understanding and agreeing with a point of view. A second language reader may, for example, fail to distinguish between
statements of opposing arguments presented for later refutation, and the writer's own position. Unless the basic points made by a writer are adequately comprehended, how is a critical interpretation possible?

Russell Arent reports on a study in socio-pragmatics dealing with the difference in registering complaints between Chinese learners and native speakers in America. Both individual perceptions of the seriousness of situations, and culturally conditioned perceptions of the flexibility of rule systems appear to be involved. For example, familiarity with the kuan-bsi system of special relationships in Mainland China may give rise to the expectation that the consequences of rule violations may be more or less negotiable, depending on the social relationships involved.

In the last section, a review article by Phil Benson looks at two books dealing with the issue of language rights: Language, Minorities and Human Rights by Fernand de Varennes and Linguistic Human Rights by Tove Skutabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson. These are valuable sources of information on a topic which has come to prominence in recent years. Benson notes that the works are essentially complementary. De Varenne's work deals with mechanisms to protect linguistic rights (although case studies suggest that they are far from effective), while Skutabb-Kangas and Phillipson document the widespread violation of linguistic rights of minority cultures around the world.

Finally, a somewhat more provocative pair of reviews focus on Stephen Pinker's The Language Instinct. Chomsky and linguists of his school such as Pinker have always generated controversy. Although not as barbed and combative as some of the intellectual slugfests of old, the views presented here are somewhat more subjective and polemical than in the main articles. Colin Barron takes up the cudgel on behalf of opponents of Pinker, arguing that huge areas of social and cultural language use are conveniently swept under the carpet in his simplistic view of the human language facility. Virginia Yip and Stephen Matthews defend Pinker's approach, suggesting that while social and cultural issues are no doubt important, his account of the psycholinguistics of language systems is basically sound. What do other readers think, about this or other controversies?